

# Partnership helps schools stay vigilant against radon threat

by Rachel Madison

STAFF WRITER

Past concerns about high radon levels at West Elementary in Tooele led to a 20-year partner-

ship between the Tooele County School District and the Tooele County Health Department to monitor schools for the deadly gas — a program that is being praised as uniquely progressive by state officials.

Jeff Coombs, deputy director of the health department, said the partnership dates back to 1992 when concerns about radon — a naturally occurring, cancer-causing gas that seeps into buildings from surrounding soil and can't be seen, tasted or smelled — began to surface.

"We got together and said we needed to look at radon," he said. "We worked to get some grants to purchase enough radon detection kits to put them in all the schools that were in the county in 1992. We put a kit in every single classroom."

Coombs said when the health department first tested the schools in the county in 1992, none of the schools came back with unfavorable results except for West Elementary. Coombs said several of the school's rooms, mainly in the center of the building near the library, had elevated levels.

"Once that was identified, the school district took remedial actions to follow up on that," Coombs said. "Now we test randomly in different schools. We don't test every classroom, but we are monitoring every school."

There are two different types of kits that are used to test for radon. The short-term kit will test an area for 48 hours and gives a snap shot of the radon levels in that area, Coombs said. A long-term test, which is placed in an area for six months to a year, gives a more accurate picture of radon levels because of its long-term exposure to the area.

Ken Luke, assistant superintendent for the Tooele County School District, said at West Elementary there are fans running 24 hours a day, seven days a week to keep air moving through the school. He said the school has installed some additional venting to continue to increase airflow, and the district's maintenance department has gone down inside the tunnels underneath the building and caulked all of the cracks in the cement.

"We have fans running down there as well," he said. "That whole area of town is a higher area for radon gas, so we had fans built in to take care of that."

On Feb. 28, the health department hosted a meeting for West Elementary's community council to discuss past radon issues within the school and inform the council and public about the actions taken in the past and currently to prevent the school from having high radon levels.

"The council had heard the school had a history of radon, so we gave them some education and awareness about the history of radon sampling at the school, what remedial actions had been taken, and what the school will do moving forward," Coombs

said.

Coombs said West Elementary is the only school in the county that has ever shown high levels, but the old Grantsville Elementary had a couple of classrooms in the past that were at slightly elevated levels. More than 20 long-term tests were placed in the new Grantsville Elementary building in January to make sure the new building does not have elevated levels of radon. The kits will be removed and sent to a lab for analyses after they have been in the school for one year.

Vickie Rolfe, an environmental health specialist with the health department, said she is testing every school in the county this year, including private schools. Coombs said she is able to test every school this year because the health department received enough grant money to do so.

"That's basically what it comes down to, the availability of funds," he said. "We typically try to test schools about every five years, but it depends on what we have grant wise and availability of funding." Rolfe only tests with the short term kits unless something shows up that requires her to also test with the long-term kits. However, West Elementary is always tested with long-term kits because of its past.

So far, Rolfe said she hasn't found any other schools that are in need of long-term testing.

"I'm not saying that isn't going to happen though," she said.

She has already tested Copper Canyon Elementary, the Oquirrh Hills Early Learning Center, Excelsior Academy, Grantsville High School, Rose Springs, Dugway Elementary School, Dugway High School, and this week, she is taking test kits to the schools in Ibapah and Wendover. West Elementary is currently being tested for long-term results, and the test kits will be picked up in September and sent to a lab for results.

John Hultquist, section manager for the Utah Division of Radiation Control, said Tooele County is doing much more than most of the other counties in Utah.

Hultquist said the state and county health departments for Salt Lake, Granite, Cache and the former Jordan school district did radon testing in the 1990s to get a representation of the schools in the area. He said 20 percent of the schools within each district were to be tested, but that Tooele County schools went above and beyond and tested all schools, and are still maintaining updated radon test results.

"They've taken additional steps, and when they test the schools they provide us with a report," he said. "They've been more progressive in their testing than schools in other districts. We welcome that initiative in getting the schools tested."

[rachelm@tooeletranscript.com](mailto:rachelm@tooeletranscript.com)

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